Why Journalists Lost America's Trust, and How They Can Start to Get it Back

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

In a turbulent era for journalism, America's overall trust in the news media has been declining for decades. While that trust has recently returned (and even grown) among some groups, opinions about the press have become another issue polarizing the nation. But beyond the debates about "fake news" and the Twitter posts celebrating mass newsroom layoffs, there are real journalists—real people—fighting to keep their jobs and show how much they care about telling important stories. In this project, I analyze some of the main factors causing public opinions about journalism to shift (including new technologies, divided politics, and changing newsrooms), then reference conversations with media experts to explain why the drop in trust could be dangerous to democracy. And as the primary purpose for this project was to discover what it might take for journalists to regain trust, I conclude with a guide about focusing on transparency, diversity, and community in the newsroom.

Acknowledgments

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I would also like to thank Damian Radcliffe and Dr. Andrew Guess for taking the time to talk with me. Their expertise provided valuable context for the secondary research included in this thesis.

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Process Analysis Statement

Though I've never doubted my choice to pursue a career in journalism, watching America's opinions of the news media shift throughout my college years has sometimes made it hard to think about entering the field as it is today. So, for this project, it was from a place of passion and real concern for my own future that I desired to understand what is happening to the journalism industry and whether there is hope of making things better.

As a long-form writer who often focuses on complicated topics, a research thesis seemed like the obvious choice. I began gathering information near the end of my junior year, referencing surveys, journals, and articles published online to teach myself about recent trends in media trust. I also started to learn why those changes had happened. I gathered enough information to be sure I wanted to pursue this topic, scheduled and attended my initial thesis appointment, then packed away my notes for summer break.

At the beginning of my senior year, it honestly took me a while to get excited about my thesis again. I was balancing a lot between classes and student media, and I knew working on my thesis would remind me of the rough job market I would enter in less than a year. But after forcing myself to sit down and form a tentative outline one afternoon, I remembered how much I cared about the topic, and I soon asked Lisa Renze-Rhodes to be my adviser.

I'd considered a few other faculty/staff from the journalism department before making this choice, but it was Lisa's passion that stood out to me most. I'd only been working with her closely as executive editor of Ball Bearings magazine for a few months at that point, but I'd already seen how knowledgeable and experienced she is in the journalism field. I was thrilled when she agreed to help me with this project.

By October, I finally took the time to put together my formal thesis proposal. I had decided by then that, in addition to secondary research, I would incorporate at least one or two expert interviews into my project. These conversations would be completely journalistic—not requiring IRB approval. Expert interviews are often my favorite part of the reporting process when I write magazine stories, and I was excited for the chance to talk with real people and ask direct questions, instead of just reading studies. For my thesis proposal, I put together a list of options for these human sources, finding possible experts in a variety of ways. Some had published articles related to the focus of my thesis. Some were connected to journalism organizations, and others showed up in search results for key terms on websites such as "Expertise Finder."

After receiving approval for my thesis proposal, I dove into my research and further developed my outline over winter break. Initially, I had planned for the primary focus of my project to be why it matters that Americans have been losing trust in the news media, and I do still have a section about that in this final version. But in moving further in the research process, I realized I was most curious about whether there was anything I could be doing as a journalist to help audiences have trust in my reporting. While still including background on what's happening to media trust, why it's happening, and why it matters, I decided to add another primary research question of what can be done to restore that trust.

Toward the beginning of spring semester, I met with Lisa to go over the thorough outline I'd created over break. We discussed a variety of ideas and trends that helped enhance the focus of my questions, as well as considered a few other interesting angles that didn't quite make it into the focus of my final thesis. For example, we discussed possibly including a section specifically about the history of the mass media and the many ways the industry has changed

over the last few decades. While some of this historical information is included throughout my final thesis, I decided that devoting a whole section to it might become too long-winded, detracting from my focus on the present and future of the journalism industry.

After this initial meeting, I started to write. I sorted through all the notes I'd already gathered, plugging information into the corresponding sections of my outline. After writing out everything I had so far, I saw gaps. I had a lot of data about trends in media trust and the factors affecting what people consider trustworthy. I also had gathered a lot of information about how trust levels differ by political leaning. But I still hadn't gotten to the heart of *why* those differences exist, and *how* journalists can go about restoring trust. Sorting the information into a partial draft and identifying missing parts helped guide my research going forward, especially when it came to my expert interviews.

At first, I thought I would start with the interviews. But deeper into the research process, I realized how much information was available from secondary online sources. I wanted to save my valuable time talking with experts to ask about the things I really couldn't find anywhere else, or to gain a better understanding of aspects I didn't quite understand. After contacting most of the individuals on my initial list of possibilities, I ended up having the opportunity to speak with two experts over the phone: Andrew Guess in mid-February, and Damian Radcliffe in mid-March. Because Guess' expertise lies mostly in the realm of politics, that conversation helped me understand how political leaning can affect the ways people consume information, and how elite messaging from political leaders changes public opinions about the media. A month later, I had mostly completed my online research, and spent my time with Radcliffe asking about all the things I hadn't quite found yet. We discussed several elements of the modern media, from technology, to politics, to diversity, to economics. Both through this conversation and through an

article he wrote for Poynter, Radcliffe also helped me understand the variety of approaches journalists and news companies can take to rebuild trust in their work.

To me, this thesis means there is hope. Even since I first started learning about media trust more than a year ago, confidence in journalists has already started to recover among some groups. And according to my secondary research and expert interviews, there is a lot more that can be done to continue working toward restored trust. I hope this project can serve as a guide to working reporters, providing ideas for building trust among their audiences.

Why Journalists Lost America's Trust, and How They Can Start to Get it Back

During one week in January 2019, more than 1,000 journalists in the United States lost their jobs to mass layoffs. The reasons were mixed, but most of the cuts happened in digital-first newsrooms—the ones that were treated as the future of the press as print begins to fade. For someone who is about to graduate college and finally start the professional journalism career I've been dreaming of since high school, it was gut-wrenching to learn of the layoffs. And the nationwide response to what happened? That was enough to make me cry.

I first found out about the job cuts on Twitter, where I saw posts from some of the journalists who had been let go, along with replies from colleagues offering support (and links to new openings). Of course I felt unnerved, but it was at least encouraging to witness how much journalists look out for one another.

Then, I saw the Tweets of celebration. In one January 24 post, CNN reporter Oliver Darcy shared an article about the 1,000 layoffs. "A lot of the replies to this are deeply

disturbing," Darcy had commented on his Tweet (@oliverdarcy). So, against my better judgement, I started reading.

"It's a half-decent start. Like to see about 3k more by the end of next week."

"Best news I've heard in months."

"Nothing of value was lost."

"This is what happens when you completely lose the trust of your audience."

"America is better off."

It went on. Nearly every reply victorious, only a few defending the press.

I've known for a while that trust in the news media is fading. I've known that the pay isn't great, that the job market is bleak. I've even known (and accepted) that if I continue my career in journalism, some people might end up hating me for my profession. But in this project, I wanted to understand more about why support for the media has plummeted and whether there is anything journalists can do—anything I can do—to make things better.

PART 1: The Fall

According to a 2018 survey by Gallup and the Knight Foundation, most American adults say they have recently lost trust in news media organizations. Trust dropped dramatically in 2016, when just 32% had at least a fair amount, the lowest level since Gallup started keeping track in 1972 ("Indicators of News Media Trust"). Confidence has gradually risen since, especially among Democrats. Poynter found in the summer of 2018 that just over half of the United States now has at least a fair amount of confidence (with 12% of respondents having a

"great deal" of confidence) in the mass media to "report the news fully, accurately, and fairly" (Guess et al.).

But this is all part of an overall drop in the last decade, during which trust has fallen among nearly 70% of Americans ("Indicators of News Media Trust"). Much of this decline is recorded especially among Republicans and conservatives, about 95% of whom say they've lost trust. Still, a majority of independent voters and more than 40% of Democrats also note declining trust.

Not all news is distrusted equally. When considering national news versus local news, the numbers reflecting each are quite different. Compared to the roughly half of Americans who trust national outlets, about 75% have confidence in their local news organizations (Guess et al.). Damian Radcliffe, the Carolyn S. Chambers Professor in Journalism at the University of Oregon and a Fellow of the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University, says audiences better identify with stories told by people from their own towns than with those told by journalists who are thousands of miles away. Local stories make sense in terms of our day-to-day lives. They allow us to read about things and people we automatically understand. In contrast, news about the White House or national politics can feel so removed from everyday reality that readers are more hesitant to trust the sources who write it. It doesn't feel real.

While most Americans still say the news media are central to democracy, according to a 2018 report by the Knight Foundation, a majority believe journalists aren't doing a very good job with that responsibility. Less than half say they can name an objective news outlet, and the biggest group of respondents (43%) had a generally negative view of the news media ("American Views").

Defining Trust

When it comes to qualities that influence trust, issues of perceived accuracy and bias are most powerful. More than 70% of Americans also mention the importance of transparency in reporting, with value placed on practices such as providing links to original research. When identifying trustworthy news sources, respondents cared most about a "commitment to accuracy" and the quick correction of mistakes. It also mattered a great deal whether the outlet had published inaccuracies in the past or was known to make frequent errors ("Indicators of News Media Trust").

While, overall, accuracy is the most important factor when people decide where to place their trust, younger Americans are also swayed by more aesthetic elements. According to 2016 research by the Media Insight Project, when looking for news online, about 70% of those aged 18-34 cared about how quickly the website loaded and whether it was user-friendly on mobile. In comparison, only about 35% of respondents over the age of 65 valued these factors ("A New Understanding").

One byproduct of the recent shifts in trust has been the rise of the term "fake news." But according to a June 2018 report by the Media Insight Project, not everyone intends the same meaning when they use the term. First used publicly by BuzzFeed editor Craig Silverman in 2014, when he referred to fake news as "completely false information that was created and spread for profit," the term is now most often associated with President Donald Trump's attempts to discredit media stories he considers unfair. Among all Americans (regardless of political affiliation), more than 70% now think of fake news as being completely fabricated stories from made-up outlets. Still, 62% believe fake news is created by real, professional

journalists, and 63% think of it as news sources spreading conspiracy theories and unsupported rumors ("Americans and the News Media"). But Trump's broader definition of fake news, which seems to include any professional story he considers sloppy or biased, does influence public opinion: More than half of Trump supporters agree with the definition, compared to less than 40% of those who don't approve of the president.

PART 2: How it Happened

In 2016, the presidential election created a turbulent few months for how Americans felt about the media. But overall, changes in trust have been a lot more gradual. Opinions have shifted alongside technology. Some factors are rooted in deeper human instincts that affect how we respond to new information. And while polarized politics are playing an especially big part over recent years, divides among Americans have been growing for decades. Finally, rather than only blaming external factors for the decline in trust, journalists must consider what internal changes or practices have contributed to the fall.

More Content, More Platforms, More Quickly

Just as humans shape technology, it shapes the ways we think and live. This can create challenges for newsrooms trying to adapt, as the same platforms that simplify or enhance some parts of reporting could be making journalism harder than ever.

Radcliffe says one of the internet's most prominent influences on journalism has been reducing barriers to entry. In the past, someone who wanted to reach an audience had to be

qualified enough to get hired at a newspaper or wealthy enough to own a broadcast license. "Anybody can be a publisher now," Radcliffe says. And because it's so easy for anyone to establish themselves as an information source online, we've lost a lot of the clues we used to have about whom to trust. We don't always have clear markers of credibility. For example, a professional news website might not look much different from a satire blog or a website meant to spread fiction.

Social media has also become a popular way for reporters and organizations to reach audiences with the latest news, but people tend to have a low amount of trust for these platforms. Of Americans who use social media to find news, fewer than 25% say they generally trust the information at least à "great deal," and most people said they trusted news from social media only "somewhat" ("A New Understanding").

Even beyond social media, news consumption is generally a lot more fragmented than it used to be. With so much content available through the internet and cable subscriptions, we can no longer assume everyone is referring to the same morning paper or nightly newscast when they talk about "the media."

This isn't all bad. We now have access to more voices and nuanced ideas than ever before. But there's only so much time in the day, and most of us still stick with the handful of sources we like most.

In addition to fueling a society where everyone consumes a different version of reality, this fragmentation can complicate research. Much existing data about changing perceptions of media was probably gathered by asking people to judge outlets they don't use ("Americans and the News Media"). But when talking about news sources they rely on most, almost a third of Americans said their trust had actually increased in the past year, and more than half said it

hadn't changed. We still trust what we know, even as some think of the broader "media" as something different, something worse—in some cases, an enemy.

Of course, the internet has also been great for journalism. In addition to the obvious benefits of having faster access to more information, things like social media and online comment threads can make journalists more accessible to their audiences. Reporters can quickly respond to feedback or ask their followers for help, being active members of the community.

But with all the new platforms for which to produce content, journalists need to work a lot harder. They might not have time to be present with their readers. Widespread internet access also sets a standard of immediacy, and audiences don't want to wait for the news. This all adds up for pressured journalists, who need to make more content for more platforms more quickly. And as newspapers across the nation have lost about 60% of jobs over the past three decades, according to The Guardian, there are fewer people left to do it (Greenslade).

The Psychology of Rejection

Especially when covering the topics audiences care most about, it can be hard to please. According to a 2017 study by researchers at University of Wisconsin at Madison, published in *Review of Communication Research*, people tend to base their perceptions of ideas and organizations on existing biases and attitudes. When we make judgements about something, we mentally place it into one of three categories. "Acceptable ideas" fall into the "latitude of acceptance," "unacceptable ideas" into the "latitude of rejection," and neutral ideas into the "latitude of non-commitment" (McLeod et al. 40). According to the article, people who are more

involved or generally care more about whatever it is they are judging tend to identify fewer ideas as acceptable.

"For media perceptions," the authors write, "this might mean that ego-involved people judge media organizations and news stories as being more different from their own preferences than they really are" (McLeod et al. 40). Consumers might also form "disconfirmation biases," basically meaning they stick to existing beliefs regardless of the amount of evidence against those beliefs. When journalists publish those opposing ideas, some people could be more likely to lose trust.

America's Partisan Divide

Probably the most blatant factor affecting the public opinion of journalists is political affiliation. As opposing parties move further from center on most major issues, the concept of a free press is no exception. For example, while the recent rise in trust has been found across the political spectrum, it can be especially attributed to Democrats, whose trust spiked from 51% in 2016 to 76% now (Jones). That's the highest level among Democrats since Gallup first started keeping track of trust by political party in the late 1990s. Among Republicans, trust is still at just 21%.

Gallup connects this growing gap with Trump's relentless attacks on the media. "Republicans agree with his assertions that the media unfairly covers his administration," the report says, "while Democrats may see the media as the institution primarily checking the president's power" (Jones).

Since the start of his campaign, Trump has repeatedly attacked professional journalists as being unfair, labeling coverage he doesn't like as "fake news." According to Poynter, it's normal for politicians to criticize the press, but the constancy of Trump's rhetoric has had real power to corrupt public opinion. "Conservatives have criticized perceived liberal media bias for decades," according to the report. "Since taking office, Trump has amplified and escalated these attacks" (Guess et al. 4). Now, 63% of his supporters (and nearly a third of Americans overall) agree that the press is an "enemy of the people."

In an October 2018 New York Times article, Jim Rutenberg discussed how "Trump's attacks on the news media are working." The attacks are almost daily, especially on his Twitter account, which many might consider a valid source of news (Rutenberg). Rutenberg cites a July 2018 poll by CBS News that found more than nine in 10 "strong Trump supporters" say they believe he provides accurate information: 63% said the same about friends and family, and just 11% trusted the media (Salvanto).

While Trump's anti-press rhetoric might be more relentless than that of past presidents, harsh criticism of journalists from the highest office isn't new. Even Thomas Jefferson once called the press a "polluted vehicle," saying, "Nothing can now be believed which is seen in a newspaper" (Mattimore). But Jefferson's complaints were mostly against the overt bias historians agree existed in the media at the time, and the president still supported a free press as crucial to the nation. Other presidents, including Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, tried to take advantage of the press through censorship and political spin. Richard Nixon attempted to control his image in the media from the beginning of his time in office, even creating a list of press members he labeled as "enemies."

The constant stream of Trump's attacks against the media on Twitter have made the rhetoric seem central to his presidency, but it's important to remember he's not the first. In a 2019 interview with The New York Times, Trump even said the free press can be a "very, very important and beautiful thing" as long as it describes what's happening "accurately and fairly" (Grynbaum). The issue with Trump, according to New York Times writer Michael M. Grynbaum, is that there isn't much he considers fair.

Andrew Guess, an assistant professor of politics and public affairs at Princeton University, says people tend to internalize messages from the leaders of partisan groups they most support. He says all politicians have incentives to discredit the journalists who are holding them accountable, but Republican leaders tend to be more blatant in this criticism than Democrats. During Trump's campaign and presidency, those specific attacks have been supercharged. Now in 2019, some people still agree with the statements and are continuing to lose trust for the media. Others (especially Democrats) have seen them as motivation to come to journalism's defense. While net numbers for media trust in recent years might make it seem like not much has changed, Guess explains that journalism is another issue polarizing our nation.

Meanwhile, trust levels among age groups seem to contradict findings based on political leaning, as older Americans have more trust than those under 30. Due to the relatively recent emergence of this gap (which began around 2007) Gallup relates it to the fact that younger people have grown up in a polarized climate. They've seen the rise of partisan outlets and rampant misinformation online, while older Americans remember the days when trustworthy newspapers and television anchors were the main source of information.

Still, more trust does not equal less division. Young people might be more likely to get their news online, but Guess says people are still debating whether the internet and social media

have really made politics more polarized. The evidence is mixed. In fact, Guess says, the Americans most likely to have become more divided in recent years are older citizens who would be the least likely to use social media—instead, they are watching cable news.

A majority of Americans say their amount of trust depends on the source, and respondents from both ends of the political spectrum were less trusting of news sources that have reputations for leaning the other way ("Indicators of News Media Trust"). While people were less likely to trust media organizations with partisan leanings contradicting their own, they didn't consider outlets with partisan reputations they agreed with to be any more trustworthy than politically neutral ones.

According to the report, people might underestimate how much their own political beliefs affect which news they trust. "A major challenge in fostering trust in the news media is that accuracy and unbiasedness are often in the eye of the beholder," according to the 2018 Gallup/Knight Foundation report, explaining that Democrats and Republicans usually don't agree on which news organizations are accurate and unbiased ("Indicators of News Media Trust" 22).

"Everyone agrees that bias is bad," Guess says, "but it's very difficult to get people to agree on whether a specific story or outlet is biased, and which direction it's biased in."

The differences in perceived trustworthiness of certain news organizations across party lines might be explained by something called the "hostile media effect," according to an article written by Lauren Feldman and published in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication.* This term describes when people of opposite political affiliations look at the exact same news coverage, and both consider it biased against their own parties. This phenomenon, which Feldman writes has been found across a wide range of studies, leads to perceptions of bias that

go beyond how someone feels about a particular news source. It can also affect a person's perception of the broader political world in a way that influences behavior within that climate.

"The hostile media effect gives news organizations and professional journalists an impossible job," according to the article, "as even fair, balanced coverage of controversial issues is perceived as biased and antagonistic by members of the groups being covered" (Feldman).

The interesting consequence is that, in blaming some neutral (and important) information as being biased, some news consumers might end up preferring sources that are *actually* biased toward their own opinions. As Feldman writes, media organizations might then respond by giving people what they want, and partisan news is what sells. So, instead of challenging an audience member's biases and false ideas, some media outlets have caved to demand and made polarization worse.

It's the Media's Fault, Too

A divided society can't be the only thing to blame. Journalists need to own up to their own weaknesses, acknowledging changes in their practices that have caused people to lose trust.

Spread so thin, newsroom staff members have become less visible to their audiences, Radcliffe says. They tell stories from behind screens, not always having time to go out, meet people, and talk about their profession in a meaningful way. "People don't see journalists physically—in the wild, if you like—as often as they used to," says Radcliffe.

There's also been a more recent blurring of lines between news and opinion in the media. Radcliffe explains that some people who see both on the same network might not be able to tell the difference. More than 40% of Americans said most of the news coverage they see is actually

just opinion or commentary ("Americans and the News Media"). Only a third of respondents thought media outlets provided a fair balance between news and analysis. Radcliffe said journalists need to do more to make the distinction clear, explaining the journalistic process and terms to their audiences.

And newsrooms need to examine where they might actually hold bias. Radcliffe points out that one reason Democrats tend to trust the media more is that the media landscape does just cater more to them. While some outlets are able to remain fairly center, of those that do lean a certain way, there are a lot more that lean left. Newsrooms also tend to be disproportionately white, male, college-educated, liberal, and concentrated in big cities. "That doesn't reflect the realities of the demographics of this country," Radcliffe says.

PART 3: Why it Matters

Within the span of two weeks in January 2019, more than 2,000 media professionals lost their jobs. In an article for The Guardian, Tow Center for Digital Journalism Director Emily Bell describes how this is just the latest heartbreak in a decade-long drop in media employment. Between 2008 and 2017, she writes, the overall number of journalism jobs in the U.S. dropped by more than 20%—45% for newspapers, specifically (Bell). Just more than 183,000 people held newspaper jobs in 2016, according to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, down from about 455,000 people in 1990 ("Employment Trends").

In the Guardian article, Bell goes on to describe how the most sustainable journalism going forward must be high quality but have low production costs and appeal to broad audiences. "Whatever this content might be," she writes, "it is unlikely to be in-depth investigative

reporting, which is neither cheap to produce nor generally something that attracts 'massive scale'" (Bell). The less people trust journalists, the less people are willing to pay for their work, and the less likely journalists will be to chase important but costly stories.

And holding elected officials accountable isn't *just* for journalists, Radcliffe explains, but people who don't trust the media and therefore don't engage with the news will be a lot less likely to care. Voters who are less informed aren't likely to pressure politicians to do their jobs well, and they won't know as much about important issues in their community that directly affect them. And those who want to stay informed but don't trust journalists might turn to unmoderated, unverified sources, Radcliffe explains.

Others will decide anything they don't like isn't true, label journalists as enemies, and cheer when reporters lose their jobs. They'll directly attack a whole profession, believing the country would be better off without it.

PART 4: Building Hope

Still, 69% of those who say they've lost trust also say that could be reversed ("Indicators of News Media Trust"). While there's hope of restoring trust, it will probably take more than careful reporting.

Improve Transparency & Education

Guess says one of the first things journalists can do is work to change the perceptions people might hold about the media and its goals. "A lot of people just believe that the media is

out to get them or is sort of a partisan operation in disguise," he says. Many Americans might see journalists as extremely liberal, or otherwise distant from the kinds of lives their audiences actually live. He says this might change if journalists held more in-person events in their communities, interacting with readers on a deeper level. "Once you have a personal connection," he says, "it's more difficult to maintain the stereotypes and generalizations people have about each other."

In a late 2018 Poynter article, Radcliffe lists some of the ways journalists can work toward improving trust. Toward the top of his list? Take pride in your work. He says reporters often don't take enough time to showcase their successes and remind audiences of the real, beneficial impacts good journalism can have. Just like when public media outlets do pledge drives, this kind of thing can help teach people that effective journalism isn't free (Radcliffe).

Research by the 2018 Media Insight Project has provided a better sense of what information audiences want reporters to give them. For example, two-thirds of Americans believe it's at least very important for journalists to more clearly explain where they found their information, strengthening the credibility of the evidence. Nearly half of the public wanted to know more about the reporting process of certain stories, and about a third wanted to know more about the background of the reporters ("Americans and the News Media").

Radcliffe agrees that transparency is one of the most important things journalists can work toward. He goes beyond asking journalists to explain what they do, but also *why* and *how* they do it. For example, he says reporters should make it clear why they cover certain stories and not others, or why some stories make the front page or get more air time. More generally, he recommends doing more community outreach to teach people about journalism at the high

school level. Staffs might also consider hosting public forums or holding editorial meetings outside the newsroom, letting community members collaborate on the storytelling process.

While reporting more transparently and providing more explanation of journalistic processes has potential for restoring trust, it's important for journalists not to belittle their audiences in the process. According to the Media Insight Project, journalists tend to underestimate how much their audiences understand, which might further damage the relationship between newsrooms and the public. Still, if done respectfully, efforts to improve media literacy should help, as those who've had more direct experiences with or education about journalism tend to have more positive feelings toward the media in general ("Americans and the News Media"). While more media-literate people also tend to have an easier time distinguishing between news and opinion, journalists must start doing more to make the difference clear to all audiences, leaving no doubt about what is fact and what isn't.

Don't Do it Alone

There's a lot journalists can change to improve the media's reputation, says Guess, but they can only do so much. Elite messaging is powerful. Guess believes if things are really going to get better, more political leaders need to talk about the need for a free press. They need to respect that media outlets are essential to democracy and stop attacking all journalists when one mistake is made. "Politicians need to play their part, too," Guess says. "And they're not going to do that unless their supporters and voters demand it."

Diversify People and Stories

Newsrooms should also consider the diversity of their communities, making sure coverage, sourcing, and staff all reflect that variety. Accurate representation of people requires strong connections with them. Otherwise, people might see themselves misrepresented and start to wonder how the news outlet would be credible for anything else.

In his article for Poynter, Radcliffe focuses especially on diversity within the newsroom, stressing that the demographics of a staff should closely resemble that of its audience. "We need more women, people of color and a wider spectrum of political beliefs and educational backgrounds in newsrooms," he writes. "And we must address the class problem that continues to blight our trade."

Journalism's low salaries and lack of job security means some aspiring journalists just can't afford to stay. Even if young people are passionate enough to get started in the profession, they might switch to something more lucrative when it's time to buy a house or have kids. Radcliffe says some newspapers have a lot of staff members in their early 20s, then a lot in their 50s, and not much in between. He believes employers should move away from the idea that they can only hire people who've completed a certain number of internships or earned a college degree.

Diverse staffs will lead to more diverse stories, which Radcliffe says is also crucial. He recommends spending a little less time on the depressing coverage that sometimes drives people away from the news, focusing more on what's working in society. Journalists should write about the good things people are working on and the ways they are trying to fix problems, he says. That's not advocacy—it's a more accurate representation of reality.

Be Human

In April 2018, New York University associate professor Jay Rosen wrote about "optimizing journalism for trust." He discusses how a journalist's credibility used to be earned just by getting the facts right. Today, he says, media organizations must go beyond the basics of solid reporting and try to create actual relationships with readers. He provides a few examples of how to do this, such as posting staff bios online, responding to criticism, and teaching people about how journalism works. Above all, though, journalists need to listen (Rosen).

"The users of journalism—the readers, the listeners, the viewers, the subscribers, the members—*have more power* now," Rosen writes. "In part because they have more choice, in part because they are paying more of the costs, as the advertising subsidy declines. Because the users of the product have more power, the makers of the product have to listen to them more."

Likewise, an article from the American Press Institute discusses how adopting a "culture of listening" throughout the newsroom can improve every part of the journalistic process. To API, listening is not a passive action. Journalists must be intentional in learning about the needs and perspectives of the communities they serve (Goins). This is especially useful for strengthening relationships with people who have previously felt alienated or misunderstood by the media. But don't stop at listening, API advises—make sure to apply what you learn to your reporting, letting people know you made changes based on their feedback.

Studying research and forming theories about trust in journalists can be valuable, but real change requires starting conversations with those people who have lost trust. The API article recommends finding the outlet's loudest critics and creating relationships that go beyond the

drive for content. Don't just do it for the story: Focus on the connection. "A newsroom with deep, extensive relationships throughout the communities it serves has more potential to get both stories and sustainable support from that community," according to the article (Goins).

As newsroom staffs thin, adding on tasks beyond gathering stories could seem daunting. However, API argues that strong community relationships, both in-person and online, form an investment that helps save time later. Reporters trying to introduce a priority of listening to skeptical, content-driven editors could start small, creating intentional conversations around a single story, then measuring and explaining the value of those community contributions.

Radcliffe also emphasizes the importance of developing these long-term connections, saying journalists should try to get rid of the ("often-true") perception that they only parachute into communities when something bad has happened. They write the story, then they disappear. He says communities want to be treated with more respect, and journalists can demonstrate that respect by spending time with people, even when they don't need something or aren't working on a specific story. They should keep going to meetings. They should interact in ways that demonstrate commitment to the people and issues of the community. When getting the facts right isn't enough, journalists should show how much they care.

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